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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1609
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RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY 1091
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY 1005
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASTANA 000713

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN -- MORE EURASIA THAN CENTRAL ASIA --
SEEKS AN ENHANCED RELATIONSHIP

REF: ASTANA 0674 (SCENESETTER FOR FM TAZHIN'S MAY 4-5
VISIT TO WASHINGTON)

Classified By: Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland: 1.4 (B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: From many conversations with top-level officials and other signals, it is clear Kazakhstan is seeking an enhanced relationship with the United States, in part to better balance its relations with especially Russia but also with China. Kazakhstan is different from the other four countries of Central Asia; it is richer, less provincial, and more progressive. Kazakhstan is a force for stability in the region -- it does not employ territorial, ethnic, economic, or energy threats or claims against its neighbors. Kazakhstan's early decisions to make serious macroeconomic reforms away from a command economy and its commitment to prepare a new generation of leaders through international education are now paying off. Civil society is alive and well in Kazakhstan, although top-down authoritarianism still sets limits. President Nazarbayev has both old-guard and progressive senior advisers and usually balances their views with a nod, even if sometimes slight, toward the progressive side, although he is cautious as he balances his equities. Constraints toward greater progress include the Committee for National Security (ex-KGB) and elements of the Ministry of Defense, which lean toward the siloviki faction in Moscow. With smart, reality-based diplomacy that puts our long-term national interests first, we can build a mutually beneficial, strategic partnership with Kazakhstan. It's our choice, because at the beginning of the Obama administration, the door is open. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The Obama Administration is focusing major foreign-policy attention and resources on Afghanistan/Pakistan and on the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship. Kazakhstan -- oil-rich, stable, and relatively progressive -- is our most reliable partner between Russia and Afghanistan and is seeking to enhance its relationship with us, including with more frequent, high-level contacts

(cabinet-level and above). We have had a good start with President-elect Obama's telephone conversation with President Nursultan Nazarbayev in November, which was greatly appreciated and widely reported in Kazakhstan; Vice President Biden's phone call to Nazarbayev on April 23; and now Foreign Minister Marat Tazhin's May 4-5 visit to Washington. It will be important to maintain regular senior-level contacts both ways.

WHAT SETS KAZAKHSTAN APART

¶3. (C) Since the fall of the Soviet Union nearly two decades ago, we have talked about a region we call Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It would be more accurate now to refer to Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Except for a few of its southern provinces bordering Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan really is not like its more southern neighbors. It is richer, less provincial, and more progressive.

¶4. (C) Part of this marked difference is a function of history. While all five countries in the region were Sovietized, only Kazakhstan was heavily Russified, with the process beginning nearly 300 years ago. About 30% of Kazakhstan's current population is still ethnic Russian, compared to single-figure percentages in the other four countries. The northern third of Kazakhstan's vast territory is still heavily ethnic-Russian, which is one key reason why President Nazarbayev planted his new capital, Astana, firmly on the steppes of southern Siberia in 1998 -- to declare to any possible irredentists, "All of Kazakhstan is ours."

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¶5. (C) Another part of Kazakhstan's marked difference is a function of national policy. Two early decisions were seminal. Immediately after independence, Kazakhstan made the fundamental decision to become a market economy and undertook serious economic and financial reforms, at the same time it opened its door to major investment by Western international oil companies. Although Kazakhstan is no stranger to post-Soviet corruption that allows senior officials and their favorites to gain vast wealth, Kazakhstan was wise enough to spread the wealth (and had enough available) so that a real economic middle class has begun to develop. Today, Kazakhstan's economy is larger than the combined economies of the other four states in the region.

¶6. (C) A second early decision set Kazakhstan apart from the other four. President Nazarbayev established the Bolashak Program to give a new generation of Kazakhstani's full university education, mostly in the West. The nearly 5,000 alumni of this on-going program are now salted throughout the upper mid-levels of the public and private sectors. Their openness to new ideas, sophistication, and self-confidence are clearly in evidence in our daily interactions. While the other four countries have serious "capacity problems," Kazakhstan is confidently moving ahead, with a new generation increasingly prepared to move into power.

BASE OUR FOREIGN POLICY ON OBJECTIVE REALITY

¶7. (C) Kazakhstan is a force for stability in the region. Relatively prosperous and at peace internally, it does not employ territorial, ethnic, economic, or energy threats or claims against its neighbors. Its "multi-vector" foreign policy adroitly balances its major partners -- Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union -- as well as important regional players like India and Iran. Nazarbayev states clearly that Russia is Kazakhstan's number-one strategic partner for any number of reasons -- geography, history, economics, infrastructure, language, and culture. But he makes likewise clear, usually in private, that Kazakhstan greatly values its independence and has no intention of being anyone's "privileged sphere of influence." Despite the close relations between Moscow and Astana,

Russia's post-colonial psychology often causes it to over-play its hand dealing with Kazakhstan. The brief Russia-Georgia war in 2008 seems to have been, to a degree, a wake-up call for Nazarbayev, and we believe he is recalibrating his foreign policy somewhat to the advantage of the United States. But it's fine-tuning; he doesn't make wild swings like Uzbekistan's Karimov between Moscow and Washington.

¶ 8. (C) For a time earlier this decade, our bilateral relations were constrained to a degree by the primacy of our focus on democracy and human rights. The annual Freedom House report that rates Kazakhstan as "not free" and lumps it together with Uzbekistan and Belarus -- an absurdity that, to use Soviet-speak, "does not correspond to objective reality" -- seemed to some to play an inordinate role in determining to what degree we would engage with the Government of Kazakhstan.

¶ 9. (C) We acknowledge that Kazakhstan is authoritarian, but its authoritarianism is generally benign, in some ways even relatively progressive. Although there might not be as many independent NGOs as some might like to see, civil society exists and is active. Citizens band together to challenge the government on specific issues without fear of being rounded up and tossed into prison. Across the political spectrum they provide testimony to Parliamentary committees.

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Government-approved and -financed "public associations" exist in which a broad range of opinion is expressed. Does the government always listen and implement the most liberal views? No. But public discussion without fear of retribution is the beginning of democratic institutions. Public discussion also occurs in the print media, which freely criticize the government (and occasionally even the President) and regularly uncover the malfeasance of government officials and other scandals.

EYES WIDE OPEN

¶ 10. (C) While we strongly advocate enhanced relations with Kazakhstan, including increased senior-level visits both ways, two constraints exist we should not ignore. This is a post-Soviet state that has both progressive factions pushing for greater liberalization and old-guard factions seeking to retain tight control. The old guard are strong in the security bodies, especially in the Committee for National Security (KNB, the Soviet KGB successor) and, to a degree, in the Ministry of Defense. The KNB and the Minister of Defense himself, but not all his deputies, are generally believed to be closely allied to the Russian siloviki faction. The KNB seems addicted to playing games to uncover (or to manufacture) "Western threats." To a degree, they have Nazarbayev's ear, but he doesn't automatically succumb to their worst instincts.

¶ 11. (C) The second constraint, also KNB-related, is Nazarbayev's implacably estranged son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev who is exiled in Europe. To please Nazarbayev, who feels Aliyev has compromised his honor, the KNB has demanded we cooperate "to capture Aliyev and render him to Kazakhstan to face justice." We cannot have a dog in that fight. This disappoints Nazarbayev, but it does not prevent him from productive cooperation when he judges that our national interests coincide.

¶ 12. (C) COMMENT: With smart, reality-based diplomacy that puts our long-term national interests first, we can build a mutually beneficial, strategic partnership with Kazakhstan. It's our choice, because at the beginning of the Obama administration the door is open. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND